DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 263 FL 018 516

AUTHOR Ford, James F.; Hassel, Jon B.
TITLE Focus on Foreign Language in the Middle School: A Description of an NEH Summer Institute.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.; In: Dimension: Languages 83. Proceedings of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (19th, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Government; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Institutes (Training Programs); *Language Teachers; *Middle Schools; Program Descriptions; Public Agencies; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Programs; Summer Programs
IDENTIFIERS *National Endowment for the Humanities; University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

The origins, development, and results of a summer institute for middle school foreign language teachers held at the University of Arkansas during summer 1983, and re-funded and extended for the next 2 years, are described. The project originated from several needs in middle school foreign language instruction: the challenges in teaching to the middle school age group; the lack of articulation or exchange of information on program design or improvement; and teachers who are undertrained, particularly in language skills. The institute addressed all three issues. Two hours were devoted daily to understanding the middle school student, in sessions conducted by a middle school specialist. The foreign language education component consisted of reading and writing activities and demonstration teaching with critique. Local middle school students served as a class for the demonstrations. Decision-making about the type, complexity, and level of formal language training for the participating teachers was somewhat problematic, and cultural topics and conversational activities in this segment were dealt with in a more elementary fashion than was originally planned. Optional French and Spanish feature films and guest lectures were provided. Participants evaluated nine institute components, revealing some program strengths and weaknesses. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED318263

FOCUS ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL:

A Description of an NEH Summer Institute

James Ford and Jon Hassel

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Gratman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL 018516

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

4

Focus on Foreign Language in the Middle School:

A Description of an NEH Summer Institute

James F. Ford and Jon B. Hassel
University of Arkansas

A Summer Institute for Middle School Foreign Language Teachers was held at the University of Arkansas during the summer of 1983. Funds for the Institute, which included a $600 stipend each for thirty teachers of French and Spanish from Arkansas and Oklahoma, were provided by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The proposal has been re-funded for 1984-85 and 1985-86 and the recruitment of teacher participants will be extended into the southeastern region of the United States. This paper discusses the context in which the project was developed, the objectives for the Institute given the particular needs of the participants, and the results, both positive and negative of the experience. We feel that there is a tremendous need for this type of project and we hope that in sharing our experiences, we will stimulate others to look at this much needed area.

The project originated from a realization that foreign language teaching in the middle schools, for a variety of reasons, is less than satisfactory. One major reason is that the problem of teaching foreign languages to the ten-to-fourteen year-old group is rarely adequately addressed. Most teachers have been trained for high school teaching with relatively little knowledge of the behavioral and learning patterns of the middle school student. Secondly, since relatively few programs exist in the middle schools, one finds a wide diversity of program types and instructional patterns. For example, some school systems have chosen exploratory programs in which the student is exposed to two or more languages in a span of six weeks to a semester, while others have simply transplanted the high school program into the middle school. Almost uniformly, there is little articulation between these programs, whatever they might be, and the high school program. Finally, many of the teachers who are assigned to the middle school are those who are seriously undertrained in terms of basic language skills.

The objectives of the NEH Institute were consequently threefold. The participants were 1) to develop understanding of the middle school learner; 2) to become familiar with the literature and resources in foreign language education in order that they might better conceptualize the middle school language program; 3) to upgrade their language skills through drill and extensive conversation with native speakers.

The grant period did not begin until May 16, 1983. However, upon notification of the grant award in late March, we immediately began the final planning for the institute itself. During this pre-institute period the following tasks were accomplished: 1) project participants were recruited and arrangements were made for the logistics of their stay at the University; 2) a middle-school specialist was hired, and in consultation with her, a syllabus was developed for the "Understanding and Teaching of the Middle School Learner;" 3) a rather elaborate enrichment program was developed for two groups of middle school students (French and Spanish) who served also as the demonstration classes; 4) a syllabus was developed and materials were acquired for the culture and conversation component of the institute; 5) a lecture and film series was planned which, although not directly linked to the institute context, was intended to provide the participants with a broadening intellectual and cultural experience; 6) a week-long pre-institute orientation session was held with the institute staff.

From June 13 to July 1, 1983 the institute itself was conducted. At the end of this period, the participants were given the opportunity to evaluate all components of the project. Plans for post-institute activities include visitation of all the participants in their home schools in order to further evaluate the impact of the institute on their programs. We are also interviewing their principals in order to determine not only what impact they felt that the institute had on the participants, but also their attitudes as administrators toward language learning in general and the support that the teachers could expect. Although we have only met with five of the participants so far, the feedback has been very encouraging and we have a greater insight into the problems and resources with which the teachers must deal.

The core curriculum of the institute parallels the objectives stated above. The activities fall into the following categories:

I. Understanding the Middle School Student
II. Foreign Language Education
    A. Reading/writing activities
    B. Demonstration class
III. Language Training
    A. Conversational activities
    B. Cultural activities

Since one of the primary objectives of the institute was understanding and dealing with the middle school student, a two-hour block of time daily was assigned to this component. These sessions were conducted by a middle school consultant and proved to be most successful as far as the participants were concerned. We began with the idea that the middle school student has different needs and requires different teaching strategies than either the elementary or the high school student. During this segment of the institute, topics such as middle school philosophy and objectives, characteristics of the middle school learner, classroom management, and team planning were dealt with.

The foreign language education component consisted of two principal parts: reading/writing activities and demonstration/critique. In order to make the institute experience more intellectually rigorous and stimulating for the participants, we felt that they should read rather extensively in the literature of foreign language education. More importantly, they should spend some time thinking about the different aspects of middle school programs and should have an opportunity to express their thoughts in writing. As a consequence, each participant was assigned a series of readings dealing with theoretical and practical approaches to foreign language teaching. The participants were given a reading packet containing thirty articles and they were asked to read and evaluate them regarding interest and utility. They were also asked to submit brief narrative comments on each article. In our discussions with the participants, we found that they do very little reading of a professional nature and we felt it would be highly beneficial for them to be exposed to and reflect upon the current developments in foreign language education. They were also asked to prepare a paper describing in detail the foreign language program in their individual schools, including a description of its strengths and weaknesses, ways it might be improved, articulation with the high school program, and the role of foreign languages in the general intellectual development of their students. Their final writing assignment, due two weeks after the end of the institute, was to discuss the benefits and ideas derived from the institute as well as their applicability to the home-school situation.

As we initially considered the relationship of theory to practice we felt that it would be beneficial for the teachers to actually teach a class and be critiqued. This demonstration class, although useful in the beginning, proved to be relatively unsuccessful. Given the number of participants and the time available, each participant could only teach one class. This proved to be rather artificial and after the first week, extremely repetitious. However, we continue to believe that in an institute with these particular goals and objectives, the participants should have direct contact with middle school students. We think the contact would be more useful in a less

structured and more individualized situation and with more integration of the material dealt with in the "Understanding the Middle-School" component. An interesting and unexpected result of the demonstration class idea, however, was the contact made with local middle-school students. In order to have this thirty-minute demonstration, we felt compelled to offer the middle school students who made up the class a broader and more enriching language experience. Consequently, we developed a very elaborate three-hour per day program for these students. Although somewhat tangential to the main goals of the institute, this program proved to be most successful for the middle school students and in turn had a favorable impact on the local community.

The question of the type, level, and complexity of the formal language training of the participants posed a very real problem. On the first day of the institute we administered the *MLA Proficiency Tests for Teachers and Advanced Students* and discovered that in most cases language skills were minimal and in some cases subminimal. From a purely pragmatic point of view, the participants should have been given remedial grammar and corrective phonetics courses. We felt, however, that to teach these elementary skills would subvert the real aims of the proposal we made to the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our original proposal stressed a cultural dialogue between the participants and native speakers to be carried on entirely in the target language. However, because of the participants' lack of linguistic sophistication and basic language skills, we were forced to deal with the cultural topics and the conversational activities in a much more elementary fashion than we had originally planned.

Conversational activities were not, however, limited to formal class hours. The participants met with the native informants for thirty minutes in the morning over coffee and again for an hour at lunch. This informal conversational activity was more successful since the conversation centered on topics of current interest, and the native speakers made efforts to involve all the participants. Most of the participants seemed to enjoy these activities and felt that their conversational skills consequently were improved.

Since we assumed, rightly, that most of the participants had never studied or visited in the countries where the languages are spoken, the culture class presented an overview of contemporary way-of-life patterns in the French and Spanish-speaking worlds. The literature on the middle-school indicates that students at this age are not particularly interested in traditional historical or geographical surveys; therefore, we concentrated on contrasting present-day life-styles, as well as presenting significant contributions in the arts and sciences which have been made by French and Spanish speaking peoples. Additionally, through videotapes and films we presented some of the beauty and outstanding geographical features of the target countries.

The participants were asked to read a series of essays dealing with contemporary cultural issues in France, Spain, and Latin America. These readings formed the basis for the cultural dialogue between the participants and the native informants. Although generally successful in providing a greater cultural awareness of the target countries and more contact with the spoken language than many of the participants had previously had, the conversations did not attain the level we had originally planned. During the course of the institute, they were asked to write two brief papers drawn from the cultural component of the institute.

In addition to the regularly scheduled daytime activities, we arranged an optional series of French and Spanish feature films and a series of guest lectures, drawn from the university academic community. Both of these series were open, not only to the participants, but to the community at large. For the same reasons as outlined above in the culture component, we felt that the participants would benefit from as many intellectually broadening experiences as we could provide. The series of guest speakers proved especially successful. For those who participated, the additional contact with the target language and culture was most rewarding.

The overall results of the Institute were highly successful in terms of impact on the middle school students who made up the demonstration class. The students enjoyed the experience and we have had a great deal of positive feed-back from parents. The success of this component of the institute was in large part due to the fact that this experience was extended beyond the demonstration class to a daily three-hour language enrichment program.

With respect to the impact upon the participants, the results were much more mixed; they were asked to evaluate individually nine separate components of the institute: 1) understanding the middle school; 2) demonstration class and critique; 3) culture/conversation; 4) lab/resources; 5) lunch with native speakers; 6) morning conversation with native speakers; 7) film series; 8) lecture series; 9) reading and writing tasks.

The following is a statistical profile of the participants' final evaluation of the components of the institute:

FINAL EVALUATION
NEH INSTITUTE

While we are aware that evaluation forms are difficult to complete when narrative comments are requested, your candid comments will be invaluable. As you know, this was the first time that we have been able to offer this type of experience, and your evaluation will permit us not only to give a more comprehensive report to our funding agency, the National

Endowment for the Humanities, but also will allow us to improve any subsequent programs of this type.

Rate the components of the Institute on a scale of one to five (one—low, five—high) and for each area please make narrative comments as to the strengths and weaknesses. Please take into consideration substantive material, instruction, reading and writing tasks, and any other comments you wish to make.

1. Understanding the middle school
   1 2 3 4 3 5 19
2. Demonstration class and critique
   1 2 2 6 3 9 4 5 5
3. Culture/conversation
   1 2 2 2 3 9 4 10 5 4
4. Lab/resources
   1 7 2 7 3 6 4 1 5
5. Lunch with native speakers
   1 2 2 3 3 6 4 8 5
6. Morning conversation with native speakers
   1 2 2 2 3 5 4 10 5 3
7. Film series
   1 3 2 2 3 8 4 6 5 2
8. Lecture series
   1 2 3 5 4 7 5 7
9. Reading and writing tasks
   1 1 2 3 3 9 4 3 5 4

Note: N= 22 Items which do not total 22 indicate no response by some participants.

From the participants' point of view, the component of "Understanding the Middle School Student" was clearly the most successful. They felt that they gained valuable insight into the personality, behavior, and learning patterns of the middle school student, as well as strategies for dealing with this age group. The weakest components were the lab and resource area and the demonstration/critique sessions. The participants felt that the lab did not function adequately and they felt that there was not enough time to use what resources were available. They were critical of the demonstration class primarily because of the artificiality of teaching an unknown class for one short period of time. For the rest of the components the participants' reactions were much less uniform, all areas being given from the lowest to the highest rating.

Our point of view, as directors of the institute, differs somewhat from that of the participants. Without in any way denigrating the "Understanding

the Middle School" component, which was very competently presented by the consultant, we think that much of the participants' response to this segment was due to the fact that the class was conducted in English, was theoretical in nature, and required little active participation on their part. From our vantage point, we think that the greatest impact on the participants was their contact with the language and culture which they teach. Perhaps the greatest shock to us was their low level of linguistic ability which was revealed during testing on the first day of the institute. Many of the participants needed extensive work and practice of a remedial nature which was not an objective of the institute. Several of them seemed to be aware of the opportunities provided and took advantage of them to strengthen their language skills. And it is our opinion that each individual, even the most reluctant, profited from the experience. Perhaps the major lesson that we have drawn from our participation in the Institute is the need that exists for on-going education of the public school teachers. As indicated in the opening paragraph, we have requested and received from the National Endowment for the Humanities a grant for the continuation of the institute for the summers of 1984 and 1985. We feel that we have learned a great deal from the initial experience which will enhance the quality of future institutes, and we look forward to greatly extending our recruiting process to provide a larger population of middle school teachers the opportunity to participate.